Philosophy and the Role of Teacher Reflections on Constructing Gender

By Colette Gosselin

Karen: You didn't vote for a boy!
Peter: I've changed my mind!
Karen: Too late, it's already a girl.
Jason: Some boys have long hair.
Karen: We're not making a rock boy. You can
          forget it!
Peter: Then let's make a girl and a boy.
Karen: There's no room!

(Laura's Classroom)

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Verbal and non-verbal communication interactions have a strong influence on the social construction of gender. Therefore understanding the classroom interaction structures we establish and the subsequent socio-cultural context those create is a vital commitment for any teacher. Furthermore, since gender is constructed in the day-to-day interactions of children's lives, our concerns for promoting equality in the lived experiences of women and men must recognize the importance of early, daily communication structures in which patterns are first observed, tested, and legitimized by authority figures such as parents and teachers.

Prior to formal schooling, the family and community are the primary places where children construct gender identity. In addition to the gendered messages they receive from parents, children observe gender at work in television, movies, books and illustrations. Studies show that young children spend nearly 30 hours per week viewing television (as cited in Witt, 2000). As a result, they are exposed to a range of programming from cartoons, commercials, sitcoms, and TV dramas that convey messages about gender. These messages range from traditional depictions of men and women in gendered professional occupations (women as nurses and men as doctors) and family roles to messages that equate femininity with thinness and submissiveness and men with brawn and violence (Witt, 2000). Popular children's literature and programming such as *The Berenstain Bears, The Boxcar Children,* and *Sesame Street* also perpetuate traditional gender roles. Finally, through make-believe play with toys such as Barbie dolls and X-men action figures, young children rehearse the theories they are exposed to. In the rehearsal process, children will internalize their observations and subsequently accommodate these into their gender scheme (Piaget, 1954).

The research on play acknowledges the powerful impact play has on gender development. From eighteen months to age three, young children engage in parallel play in which activities are engaged in side by side (Fromberg, 1992; Garvey, 1990; Johnson & Wardle, 2005). But these interactions do not show full social awareness; their conversational goals are egocentric. After age three, children become more social and begin to interact and play with other children. These play interactions also shape children's communication skills. Since these are the very skills that determine the kinds of interactions in which children engage in, their sound development is a crucial foundation to their lives as fully engaged individuals.

Commensurate with this social development is the formation of a gendered self. As the child grows, cultural codes of femininity and masculinity are reinforced and contested by the child as s/he interacts with his/her social environment (Goncu, 1993). Since identity development is embedded in the interaction structures that organize the child's social relationships, different interaction structures will impact the kind of gendered self the child constructs. When placed in structures that expect stereotypical role performances, children are coached into definitions of the self that incorporate traditional limits and inequities. By contrast, children who are provided with roles that balance opportunities and power relationships can construct the full potential of gender.

Further, once children begin formal schooling, teachers, peers, curricula and school culture work in concert with the home environment to shape gender through many types of interactions including written, verbal, physical, pictorial activities, and other means of expression. Each of these encounters inevitably involves attempts by all participants to regulate identity development. This is not a stereotype that is imposed on developing children but is an interaction process in which children mediate their identity as a response to both internal and external influences to enact some recognized social role (Bruner, 1987). This interactive

process between children and the environment is continuous and contingent upon the multiple influences of everyday life. As children navigate their responses to these influences, they develop a framework through which they mediate gender (deGroot Kim, in press; Maccoby, 2000; Warin 2000).

Early Childhood Play Studies and Gender

Studies of children's play amply demonstrate how they develop symbolic manipulation that enables them to communicate with other children (Frost, Wortham, & Reifel &, 2005; Garvey,1984, 1990; Jaffe & Hyde, 2000; Trawick-Smith, 2006). In play, they engage in dialogue that center around make-believe, sharing of resources, and the division of roles. In these interchanges, children are challenged to mediate between their ideas and the expectations of others and make meaning of their own world. But verbal interactions are not the only influence; non-verbal interactions with other children and with teachers strongly influence communication competencies and intersubjective meaning making (Blaise, 2005; Feldman, Philippot, & Crustini, 1991; Garvey, 1990, 1982; Goncu, 1993; Saarni, 1982). For example, in a study on the socialization of two and three year olds, deGroot Kim (1999, 2002) documents how gender roles are initially but unintentionally organized by boys through nonverbal, physical interactions or "puppy wrestling" as they wait by the classroom door to be released for outside play. Each time this activity occurred, the boys were let out first by the teacher while the "girls waited" and remained behind to cleanup. By legitimizing this behavior—playful disruption by the door is rewarded by first outside to play—the teachers unintentionally taught powerful lessons about gender to all the children in the classroom. Over time, de Groot Kim observed this behavior escalate. Subsequently, the girls and boys internalized the gendered message that "girls wait" and stay inside to help cleanup.

Children also test gender theories on the playground. The playground offers opportunities to engage in different kinds of activities (team sports versus turn taking activities) wherein children learn roles, rules that govern the game, and practice negotiation tactics (Lever, 1978, 1976; Thorne, 1999). Playground studies show, however, that children are more inclined to play with others who are the same gender thereby rehearsing and reinforcing gender roles independent of their teachers. In these kinds of interactions, the ability to negotiate meanings is not challenged by the complications of different language and communication styles, interaction strategies, or competing demands. Therefore, when boys and girls play separately, the opportunity to learn new interaction strategies becomes limited. Furthermore, these studies show that in play, boys frequently learn to confront and resolve emerging disagreements, while girls typically end play if they perceive negotiating to be detrimental to their friendships (Thorne, 1999). Ultimately, if children choose playmates with similar interaction styles, they may reinforce gendered skills and meanings as they co-construct identities and social skills.

It is in the challenge to engage with someone different that new communication and language skills emerge that can support the co-construction of non-traditional

gender roles. When children play with others who are different from themselves, they may explore other vocabularies and actions in order to sustain the play interactions. Accordingly, play provides a critical developmental opportunity for fostering situations in which children can formulate new meanings as they negotiate the demands of their life in home and at school (Blaise, 2005, p. 15).

This dynamic is especially relevant to gender development in school as well as inside the home. If, as research suggests, girls are more likely to interact with other girls and boys are more likely to interact with other boys, the chance that each will engage in gender-specific strategies increases thereby re-inscribing gender norms that reinforce the kind of 'rapport talk' described by Deborah Tanner (1990). Moreoever, classrooms that endorse gender-separated practices not only proactively support boys and girls' use of gendered voices and actions, they may also unintentionally create social conditions that limit them to it. The challenge to the teacher is to create a balanced mix of social interactions that support the formation of dynamic gendered identities as well as promote successful cross-gender working relationships.

Promoting Philosophical Reflection in Teacher Education

Typically, philosophers of education aim to assist teachers in clarifying their beliefs about teaching in general. Hopefully, through some pre-service coursework, teachers have been introduced to the process of reflecting on their teaching philosophies and how these are manifested in classroom practices. However, since teachers influence such a fundamental aspect of children's social development through the ways they construct classroom practices, it seems important that we should understand how well they can observe and engage in philosophically grounded reflection of their role in shaping gender communication, attitudes and skills. Therefore, as we aim to extend our concern for gender in everyday life, the question becomes one of how well teachers are prepared to philosophically focus their reflections on specific agendas, such as the way their practices are shaping gender.

For many teachers, a philosophical approach for understanding classroom practice is hampered by their limited exposure to philosophy. Teachers primarily envision philosophy as an endeavor that engages metaphysical conceptualization of abstract ideas that have little bearing on the inequities in contemporary classrooms. They typically do not understand how philosophy of education fits into the grand narrative of philosophy as a discipline. Therefore, teachers tend to view philosophy of education as disconnected from the lived experience of teachers and consequently do not posit that philosophy of education can serve as a "primary instrument of social change" or as a tool for action that can assist their efforts to strategically examine the political nature of their practice (Ozman & Craver, 1976, p.107). Subsequently, while teachers have been traditionally encouraged to use theoretical abstraction to develop consistency in their beliefs and practices, typically they do not call upon a philosophical lens to think clearly about what they are doing in a larger context nor to raise fundamental philosophical questions regarding "what is

real, what is true and what is worth knowing" about the socio-cultural contexts in which they teach (Gutek, 2004, p. 4). Unfortunately, this means that teachers will not draw upon philosophy to engage in reflection in the act of teaching or to reflect on teaching actions (Schon, 1983). As important as it may be for philosophers to analyze and test these understandings, it is as essential that teachers formulate a vision of philosophy of education as a means of extending their "thinking capacity" that prepares them to "grapple with human problems" embedded in the lived experiences of their hurried everyday events (Ozman & Craver, 1976, p. 223). Therefore as philosophers, we need to better demonstrate how teachers can study and approach their practice through philosophical inquiry if we are to aid teachers in using the potential of philosophically grounded reflection.

Specifically, we need to ask ourselves how our programs can promote reflective practices and what this actually means for the teacher candidate who eventually becomes a classroom teacher and is no longer required to write reflectively. How do we, as philosophers of education, aid teachers to re-conceptualize the meaning of philosophy of education, evaluate the bearing philosophy has on the kinds of questions they ask, and how they can use philosophy as a tool to understand the juncture of theory and practice in the classroom.

Purpose of this Study

The aim of this exploratory ethnographic study is to describe how two teachers' unexamined philosophies impacted the construction of gender within the practices of their classroom and to consider the powerful impact these practices may have had on the lives of their students. What follows is not an attempt to make broad generalizations about classroom practices. Rather, it is a description of the issues that arise when we try to bring philosophical work into the lived experiences of practicing teachers. It explores the dilemma of bridging theory and practice that must occur if we are to reform gender inequity at the level of daily classroom practices, and not just in theoretical models.

This study also explores the degree to which teacher reflection can go beyond general belief statements. It examines how two different teachers organized their classrooms, the effects this organization had on children's interactions, and, most importantly, how the teachers could have used philosophical reflection to recognize the impact they were having on gender development. The results illustrate the need to better prepare teachers who are able to reflect on how their beliefs shape their classroom interactions, and thus, the development of children's gender identity.

Approach to Inquiry

This project focuses on two different first grade classrooms taught by a veteran female teacher and a novice male teacher at a predominantly white, elementary school in a well appointed community in a middle state. After meeting with the principal to discuss this research project, two first grade teachers volunteered for

the study. I met with both teachers, Peter and Laura (fictitious names), explained my project, and my desire to visit their two classrooms using participant observation and interviews. Both were enthusiastic and friendly.

Most participant observations took place during the first hour of the school day and included morning meeting time. During the morning meeting, the teacher and students gathered in close proximity to each other with the teacher seated at the front of the rug group and the children seated on the floor. In addition to morning meeting time, there were other opportunities to observe group and individual work. On a few occasions, I observed the children briefly in the schoolyard and in the lunchroom. I found both teachers to be effective, energetic and excited about teaching. Their classrooms were large and sunny with busy, active children. The atmosphere was warm and inviting. Both teachers made classroom materials, games, and books readily accessible to the children. While my role was that of an observer, I was able to freely interact and help the children, if they sought it. Initially, the students were inquisitive about my presence and occasionally they inquired about "what I was doing" but eventually their focus on my presence faded.

Data was collected through participant observation in both classrooms for a period of eight weeks. In addition, after the observational period was completed, individual semi-structured interviews with both teachers were conducted, each lasting approximately one and one-half hours. The two groups of girls from each classroom were interviewed separately.

Project Focus: Gender and Work in Two First Grade Classrooms

I observed an interesting dynamic emerge quite early in the study. It became evident that a clear relationship existed between their teaching philosophies, their classroom practices, and the resulting interaction between girls and boys. Interviews with the teachers, Laura and Peter, revealed that each had well-considered teaching 'philosophies' and could explain how their beliefs shaped the kinds of learning activities they created for their students. However, the two teaching 'philosophies' illustrated very different beliefs about student autonomy and relationships as part of work in the classroom. Not only did I observe *how* these philosophies were made visible, but the demonstrated consistency between the espoused teacher beliefs and practices was evident and admirable. Guided by their beliefs, the two teachers implemented corresponding classroom interactions, specifically regarding how each organized small group work. This, however, impacted the negotiation of gender roles in very different ways. Further, while both teachers acted on their respective philosophies, it became evident that Peter had not explicitly considered the impact of his activities in terms of how the interactions between girls and boys might shape their learning of gender roles. Yet, as I will show, his unarticulated beliefs were having a direct effect on gender development within the students' lived experiences in his classroom. In the course of the study, I realized that this was exactly the kind of intersection between theory and practice that calls for philosophic reflection on lived experience. I asked myself, "What is involved in helping teachers engage

in this type of reflection?" What follows is a description of the context of both classrooms, the gender interactions I observed, and the teachers' philosophies.

Peter's Classroom Context

Peter was a novice teacher and the only male classroom teacher at the elementary school. His class was comprised of 22 children, 10 boys and 12 girls, ranging in age from six to seven. The desks were arranged to form large work tables; overall the desk arrangement formed a large U. Although some girls were scattered among the boys, a cluster of girls sat together. Children's personal supplies such as notebooks and markers were stored inside their desks.

Peter had a friendly and casual demeanor. He informally greeted the children when they arrived in the morning. Recognizing the importance of morning arrival, he set the tone by permitting the children free time. He felt strongly that children's needs were similar to adults who required a transitional window from the world of home to that of work. During free time, the children played individually or in groups choosing activities ranging from journaling, art, math games, or chess. As they played, soft, classical music filled the background. Later, the sounds of string instruments and piano would be replaced by lively Beach Boy tunes which signaled the end of free play, clean-up and meeting time. At meeting time, the girls clustered together in the center of the rug while the boys sat at the periphery. Routinely the girls raised their hands and waited to be called on. Generally, the boys did this as well but sometimes they called out or commented aloud.

Peter was committed to the process of learning and devoted ample time to the development of a project. At the time of the observations, the children were collectively writing a marine interpretation of "The Three Little Pigs" with a fisherman cast as the big bad wolf. He avidly encouraged the students, praising specific aspects of their work ("wonderful!"), commented on "the use of voice," the number of "gem words," and "giving characters' lines" in their stories. Referring to writing as "magic" Peter explained to the children that a well told story creates a "videotape of the story in your mind." Lastly, Peter carefully managed time but rarely stopped an activity arbitrarily. I found Peter's support of the writing process illustrative of the kinds of exemplary practices teacher educators attempt to inculcate in their own students.

Laura's Classroom Context

Laura was a young, but experienced teacher who had been teaching first grade for seven years. Her classroom was comprised of 22 children, 12 boys and 10 girls. The desks were arranged in mixed gender groups throughout the room. Laura had a friendly demeanor, spoke softly, and smiled genuinely to the children. Her "teacher's voice" employed inflections and intonations to stress key words when she spoke. She knelt down when working with the children and lowered her voice when she disciplined them typically employing "shush" when the student she addressed was talking.

Unlike Peter, Laura's classroom was more teacher-centered. She exercised more authority over the children's work although she did emphasize voice and self-expression. Typically there were multiple activities occurring simultaneously; these were facilitated by regular volunteers, such as parents or grandparents. In buzz groups, children exercised their authority over their projects. Yet, as they worked, Laura instructed the children in detail about "how she wanted their work" completed or how they needed to allow enough "wait time" to speak, the kinds of materials she preferred them to use, "crayons are better than markers." She also reinforced their compliant, attentive and quiet behavior with the praise, "good listening." She called the children to meeting time by "ready (quiet) tables" and she reminded them that the speaker had "speaker power" signaling interruption as an inappropriate behavior.

Laura used a more traditional approach in the classroom as well. While at times there seemed to be less vitality and freshness in Laura's teaching style, I observed her to be caring, thoughtful, creative, and well prepared. Despite her traditional approach, the students' interactions had much more energy and vitality than the students in Peter's classroom. The boys and girls equally shared the classroom work space, materials and ideas. They rehearsed the need to listen and responded to different communication patterns, as this was central to Laura's goals. She felt strongly that this skill was essential as eventually the children would grow up and live in adult relationships; for Laura, success in relationships hinged upon effective communication.

Comparison of Two Different Context Structures

As I observed Peter's and Laura's classrooms, it became evident to me that both teachers had very different priorities about work. Peter's classroom was more student centered, his teaching style was gentle, caring and supportive. The planned activities were consistently re-conceptualized, as Peter clearly listened and integrated his students' ideas. Peter was diligent in developing the writing process. He attended to each step and the children seemed unaware that they were engaged in "work" as they popped out of their seats eagerly providing suggestions for the story they were collectively writing. In these aspects, Peter was an impressive teacher who drew on exemplified best practices. Yet, the girls in his classroom were noticeably wallflowers who faded amidst the excitement and vitality of this classroom, and Peter seemed unaware.

I became curious about Laura's and Peter's teaching philosophies. As a foundations educator concerned with the socio-cultural context of classrooms, I hoped these two teachers would share their beliefs on classroom structures and the implications they felt these structures had on the children they taught. Consequently, the interviews focused on the teachers' awareness of interactions between and among children while they worked.

Peter's Teaching Philosophy and Beliefs about Students, Groups, & Gender

Autonomy and child-centeredness were central to Peter's teaching philosophy. He achieved these goals in a myriad of ways such as using music (He said, I don't "want the children to be hearing my voice all the time") and through curriculum modifications. He identified problem solving as an essential skill and fostered its development by asking "What kind of choice are you going to make here?" As a teacher, he felt he "needed to cooperate with them" and "help them work through" problems. Children affirmed each other by saying "I like you." For Peter, this seemed to be a necessary conclusion to the resolution of problems. Peter also did not accept non-peaceful behavior in the classroom. When a child acted out at meeting time, he told the child "Go away and come back when you're ready." To Peter, this afforded the child time to reflect on his behavior.

Also central to his philosophy was the idea that children must be given ample opportunities to exercise choice over their work and with whom they worked, so that their best product would be developed. He felt that affirmation, friendship and socializing were needed to create comfortable working relationships. In describing adult work relationships, Peter said that we "select the people that are going to work with you, that you're comfortable with, that we have a good rapport with . . . We know kind of what they're thinking already so it's easier to work with them." As a result, the children routinely chose with whom they worked because of "what comes out of it." Continuing this line of thought, he added, when children work in mixed gender groups they "go more into the project, in getting the project done. Drawing from his personal experience, he embellished on this thought explaining that "women get involved in the details of something and lose sight of the bigger picture" while men "stick less with details. You need both."

Laura's Teaching Philosophy and Beliefs about Students, Groups, & Gender

In Laura's classroom, I saw an entirely different dynamic in place than in Peter's classroom. In her interview, Laura revealed that heterogeneous grouping was her primary concern. She named a group of girls she identified as class leaders; these girls were intentionally placed in different groups with other children. Typically, she formed groups based on ability and requisite skills. For example, if a good artist was essential to the project, Laura did her best to place a child with that ability in each group. I also observed Laura cue group dynamics by announcing that "we need some girls" when girls failed to volunteer for a project. When I raised this question in the interview, Laura responded strongly emphasizing that boys and girls "should interact." She believed that girls and boys needed to learn to work together to practice life skills, adding that these skills were necessary in the adult world—"we grow up, get married and live together. We need to learn how to talk with each other."

Embellishing on this point, Laura said she felt certain that if given a choice, girls would choose to work with other girls and boys would choose boys. She saw

friendships as the governing factor behind this, adding that sometimes boys and girls played together on the playground, but usually they did not. From experience she learned, however, that children are "willing to work with whomever they are assigned to without complaint."

Different Philosophies and Their Impact on Gender Communication Patterns

Laura and Peter had clearly different philosophies regarding work, autonomy and social interaction. As we examine, the interaction in each classroom we can identify the impact that these philosophies had on group structures and gender communication patterns.

Peter's Group Structures and Gender Communication Patterns

My observations in Peter's classroom confirmed Barrie Thorne's (1999) work; girls chose girls to work with girls and boys chose boys. Throughout the morning, girls paired off to do math puzzles, play chase games, use the computer and the cloth board, hold hands in line, and sit together at snack. During individualized work time, the girls typically sat in close proximity, shared materials, and sharpened pencils together. Most pronounced was the pattern that initiated the shift in my research: during early morning "free time" the girls clustered in one corner playing quietly while the boys boisterously spread out throughout the room.

In the interviews, all the girls echoed Peter beliefs regarding task completion and product satisfaction. The girls complained about working with boys citing times they would quit midstream leaving the girls to finish the assignment. They disliked final projects decorated with witches or butterflies "all over the place" adding that sometimes they would cut out large paper pieces to cover and re-do the boys' work. Other times this would necessitate nearly re-doing the assignment completely; reluctantly, they couldn't refashion it to their liking. For these reasons, the girls preferred working with other girls; being girls themselves they knew how they thought and felt confident in shared thinking about the project they were assigned.

While the girls worked in Peter's classroom, they chitchatted in low soft spoken voices making it difficult for me to hear their conversation. However, I overheard relational conversation patterns indicating a rehearsal of intimacy skill development. This intimacy was supported when they shared materials, took turns drawing or complimented each other as they sought praise by asking, "Do you like my picture?"

The girls also exchanged ideas and quickly came to resolutions and compromises regarding shared projects. The need for firm language in negotiations was largely absent. This observation was corroborated in the interview when the girls asserted that the boys thought differently. While unable to articulate or describe this difference, they had experienced it. The girls simply did not know what to expect when they worked with boys.

Laura's Group Structures and Gender Interaction Patterns

Unlike Peter's classroom, the degree of cross gender interaction in Laura's classroom was noticeable, but Laura explained that the school year did not begin that way. The children had begun the school year with some close friendships with children of the same gender. They were social with other children but much more so within the pre-formed social groups created in kindergarten. How did the children progress from these closed groups to more interaction with others? Laura was uncertain but thought that possibly this was a consequence of the interaction in her classroom. She had noticed that children were engaged in after school play dates with a variety of children. "Girls went home with different girls; therefore, instead of having one friend they had three or four." This she noticed was also true of the boys.

Some of the girls in Laura's classroom used powerful voices when working with the boys in groups. Presumably these were the leaders in the class. They would respond to perceived encroachment with firm voices asserting "no, it's not your turn," "it doesn't matter, we're not doing it (your way)," or "don't tell me (what to do), you're not supposed to be here." One time, Jack asked Alexa, "what are you doing?" She simply responded, "what I want to do!" During a group project one of the boys suggested turning their long hair character into a boy; one girl forcefully replied, "we're not making a rock boy, you can forget it!" Laura did not intervene during these kinds of negotiations, an indication that this was a socializing structure she intentionally encouraged. Indirectly, the children clearly received their teacher's message that negotiating across gender was an expectation. Such interactions were not observed in Peter's classroom.

Another example illustrates the children learning the workings of democracy and consensus building. Five children were busy drawing and coloring a poster that illustrated the children's fairytale, *Jack and the Beanstalk.* Two girls had drawn the house, cut out the beanstalk and the grass from construction paper, and then glued these to a large sheet of paper they had been given. Meanwhile, the boys were coloring the sky. Jason wanted to color in the house. Realizing that the boys outnumbered the girls three to two, Jason confidently called for a vote. "Who wants to color in the house? Raise your hands." As if signaled, the three boys raised their hands in unison. The boys proudly announced, "Three against two. We win. We want to color it in." Karen seemingly recognized the stacking of votes and subsequently refused to accept the ruling. She responded firmly, "It doesn't matter, you're not." The boys contested; they had won the vote. But Karen ignored their complaints; the boys did not attempt to color in the house. Afterwards, one of the boys asked, "How about butterflies?" Karen proceeded to show him how the butterflies should look and where they should be. When he had drawn "too many" she told him, "That's enough. We have enough!" And he complied!

Other interactions between the girls and boys in Laura's classroom spilled over into individual work time. While the girls and boys sometimes walked over to

chat with their friends, the boys and girls also interacted as often with members of their own sex as with each other. Girls and boys borrowed or fought over materials, praised each other's work, and collaborated more; but sometimes they had to insist on being heard, and push their ideas either by persisting or by raising their voices. Other times, the children leaned over their desks toward one another, teased each other verbally with pencils, or by grabbing their shirts. Sometimes boys helped girls and girls helped boys. Girls used powerful voices during this time as well. While two girls were working at the computer, a boy walked over to watch but kept providing unsolicited answers for the math problems they were solving. Nancy turned to him and yelled, "Don't tell me!" When he persisted to supply answers, she turned to him and with a loud voice shouted, "Don't tell me, you're not suppose to be here!" She then turned to her friend and questioned, "Why is everyone crowding around our computer?" The boy replied, "It's not your computer!" and then he left.

Discussion

Although Peter and Laura can be described as pretty savvy teachers, they demonstrated little awareness of the importance of critically examining their practice. While this study is too brief to draw strong evidenced based assertions, what the time spent in these two classrooms revealed was a complex dynamic involving two different philosophies of teaching that thought about autonomy, work, and relationships in very different ways. This dynamic revealed how two different philosophies of teaching influenced the degree of interaction between the boys and girls in each classroom, resulting in different patterns of behavior across gender. Peter, in identifying choice and autonomy as core beliefs, created interaction structures that generated the best working conditions that would "get the project done." While acknowledging that children benefit from working in mixed gender groups ("the children go more into the project in getting the project done") his preference was to avoid conflicts that arise when children work with others who interact differently. He confirmed this when he stated that it's easier to work with a friend because we know "what they're thinking already." Thus, while Peter was confident that both girls and boys were needed for a more comprehensive product, he reinforced gender separation in order to create easier working conditions by avoiding gender conflicts.

Equally important was Peter's commitment to the production model of schooling. While admitting that schools serve a social function, he described this occurring when the children transitioned from home to school. He asserted that while the "social is important when they come in . . . . when they come in school *it is school*. They need to be doing something constructive." As a result, Peter's core beliefs about autonomy, task satisfaction and product came at the expense of communication skills that could have developed from cross gender interaction.

 In Laura's classroom an entirely different dynamic with regards to gender was demonstrated. Although Laura's classroom was more teacher-centered, interactions across gender occurred frequently. The children worked together willingly

with whomever they were assigned without complaint. Children shared materials, negotiated on projects, products and work space. A possible consequence of this choice was the challenge to learn a different vocabulary, a vocabulary that would help the children in the world of work and in their relationships. In this interaction structure, boys and girls could both learn to be assertive, make demands and statements, and understand how the other gender communicates. Without this opportunity, the children were left on their own to resist traditional gender messages about what it means to be boy or girl in our society.

Summary

This exploratory study raises important implications regarding the distribution of power and gender equity in classrooms. By offering children choices, a teacher's desire to empower children by offering control over their working conditions, may in fact undermine the larger social aim for the democratic value of gender equity and subsequently re-inscribe the reproduction of cultural codes of femininity leaving the teacher's goal of empowerment in girls unrealized. The question remains, how do we help teachers recognize the consequences of the choices they make in their classrooms?

When this research project began, Laura and Peter had warmly and openly welcomed me into their classrooms and availed themselves and the children to me. They requested that I share the manuscript that I intended to write. As a novice researcher I anticipated that they would be excited about my discoveries and be eager to discuss them. As it turned out, that was not the case. Both were furious and felt my descriptions mischaracterized them. Each felt the other's classroom to be superior to the other's; for different reasons each was hurt and we never had the chance to discuss what I felt was a critical observation.

In retrospect, I should have handled the situation differently but inexperience and perhaps overzealousness as a novice resulted in my inability to mend the relationship. From this outcome I did learn the need to furnish information less formally, more judiciously, and more indirectly. I also learned that confident, eager teachers are not always ready to grapple with the nature of the social structures they establish and the implications these structures have on student achievement and social interactions. This finding in itself highlights the need to better develop the disposition and skills that welcome this kind of critical self-examination in teacher education programs.

We know from preschool research on children and play that younger children tend to play with children of the same gender especially in large group settings. Furthermore, we know that when permitted choice, children prefer to work with children of the same sex. In fact, my college students confirm that this practice continues well into the high schools where they complete their fieldwork. We also realize that gender differences in play can result in the socialization of gendered roles and skills. In fact, in these experiences, children may develop attitudes that only same-sex playmates are appropriate and form concepts of what male and females

do (meaning how they act and who they play with) and then use these concepts to form their own schema to interpret information and structure their own behavior (Maccoby, 1994, 2000; Martin & Halverson, 1981).

Since these processes inform each other in the construction of gender identity, and children spend a substantial part of their lives in schools, classrooms can serve as "construction" sites that provide alternative experiences that challenge social norms. If our role as teachers is to provide such experiences, then it seems evident that we must actively create such opportunities. Critically reflecting on the relationship between our teaching philosophies and our classroom practices can reveal the implications our choices have on the children we teach.

Classrooms are sites where democratic processes are instilled, where voice, language and power are developed. While teachers may be good at effective lesson planning, they frequently do not have the knowledge or skills to engage in a level of reflection that critically examines social structures in their classrooms and ways in which the democratic process may be supported or hindered. Findings in this exploratory study discovered such a situation. As teacher educators, we need to promote reflection at this level of human interaction so that our gender equity agenda can move forward. If men and women (consequently male teachers and female teachers) do converse differently and with different purposes, we must communicate and interact across gender in order to understand how the other speaks. Furthermore, if our gender identity is constituted within the language we employ and the in kinds of social interactions we engage, it seems evident that we have an obligation as teachers to interrupt this process by generating alternative language forms, negotiation situations, and interaction structures that provide children with an opportunity to construct more authentic gendered selves.

Since gender conformity and its reinforcement by preschool teachers has been well researched and documented (deGroot Kim 2002; Serbin et al., 1994; Wittmer et al., 1994), first grade teachers are in a position to either continue or disrupt this process. By examining their own assumptions, predispositions and critically reflecting on their philosophies of teaching and the classroom practices their philosophies support, first grade teachers are in a powerful position to influence the development of more dynamic gender identities in first grade classrooms. In effect if we do not require this of ourselves, then we may deny our children the opportunity to develop the kind of language skills and gendered selves needed to interact effectively and meaningfully in a rapidly changing world.

Recommendations

Classroom practices and interaction structures that promote or inhibit genuine gender development may remain invisible to the teacher who is embedded in the immediacy of classroom management. As a result, teacher preparation programs need to better prepare teachers to reflect critically on their practice. This can be achieved through a strong foundations approach in teacher preparation programs and by fostering critical friendships with teachers and among pre-service teachers.

1. Strengthening Teacher Preparation Programs through a Foundations Approach

A strong teacher preparation program built on a foundations framework is one mechanism whereby pre-service teachers can be encouraged to be more critically reflective about the socio-cultural interaction structures in classrooms. Unlike teacher prep programs that primarily focus on instruction and classroom management, a foundations based program can be designed to build and attend to socio-cultural awareness that extends student inquiry beyond identification of surface level differences in race, class, and language backgrounds. In order for pre-service teachers to question the relationship between socio-cultural differences and pedagogical practice, they must be taught to engage in this query. They must be taught to become consciously aware that their instructional questions are rooted in un-interrogated beliefs about themselves, other students and schools, in general. Furthermore, they must be taught to recognize that their beliefs will be manifested in the teaching practices and methodological choices that they will eventually be required to make (Bartholome, 1994). Through a programmatic effort that instills the development of critical reflective skills, pre-service teachers can develop a habit of mind in which interrogating classroom practice becomes a given behavior.

The undergraduate secondary education program in the college at which I work was recently redesigned as a foundations program. The program consists of a core of three foundations courses: an introductory course that examines the relationship between interaction structures and student achievement, a course in adolescent learning and development, and a course in social foundations. All three courses draw on normative social structures of race, class and gender to focus the content. Unlike traditional teacher preparation programs, our methods courses work in tandem with the foundations courses as many of our methods faculty are also foundations specialists. As a result, issues of race, class and gender are recurring themes as students study, create and implement instructional units. Critical reflection of their own field practicum continues as students are expected to apply theories they learn to their actual classroom practices in their fieldwork. Former students have recently begun to anecdotally report back that they are continuing to reflect on their practice in student teaching as they have learned of its value in guiding their instructional practice in their junior field practicum.

2. Promoting Critical Reflection

A foundations approach in every teacher education program may not be realizable. However, critical reflection is essential to every teacher education program. Therefore, critical reflection must be supported in teacher preparation programs where curriculum and instruction is the primary focus. One obstacle we face in teacher education stems from overuse of the word reflection. Until recently my own students' reflection had become almost meaningless. Turning to Dewey (1933) and asking "What exactly do we need our teachers to do when they reflect?" led me to

redesign my foundations courses and fieldwork assignments towards Dewey's consideration of reflection as an "active, persistent, and careful consideration" of beliefs. As a result of more guided analyses that connect anecdotal classroom observations to theories they were learning in class, my students' reflections have become more focused on the their own presuppositions and assumptions that would inevitably impact the curricular choices and the social structures they would impose in their future classrooms. As a result of uncovering their hidden arguments and the implications these would have on their future students, as future teachers they may be more enabled to take action on their new awareness and knowledge about socio-cultural interaction structures that occur in classrooms (Dewey, 1933; Zeichner 1987).

The word reflection, however, is still too broad and fails to explain how reflection becomes critical. Brookfield (1995) distinguishes reflection from critical reflection. As he explains, critical reflection must meet two purposes. First, the dynamics of power and how it "frames and distorts educational processes and interactions" must be understood. Second, we must be willing to "question assumptions and practices that seem to make our teaching lives easier" yet work against long-term social interests. This is an especially challenging goal as it requires teachers to move beyond recognizing their work as personal to understanding it as political. As this study illustrates, neither Peter nor Laura, as practicing teachers, characterized their work as political or social wherein identities are negotiated and created; neither did they engage in a discourse that illustrated their recognition of the power relationships they were influencing. Much like my own students, Laura and Peter regarded their pedagogical choices as personal and individual preferences. In fact, while Laura deliberately implemented strategies that fostered interaction across gender neither she nor Peter questioned why first grade children have established gender communication patterns that resemble those of adults. Nor did either teacher consider the potential of disrupting those structures pedagogically. Instead both accepted these social conditions as given.

If we intend for teachers to design classroom structures that provide children and youth with opportunities to construct nonconforming gender identities, then we must improve our own work in the area of teacher education. Further, we must develop mechanisms whereby teachers can be encouraged and supported to do this kind of work when they leave our college classrooms and create their own.

3. Establishing School Partnerships and Critical Friendships

A third means of providing support for classroom teachers is through a critical friends model (Costa & Kallick, 1993; Fentermacher, 1994). According to Costa and Kallick, critical friends are trusted individuals who pose provocative questions from evidence gathered in observations and conversations. Critical friends provide a new lens from which a person's work can be examined. Essential to the effectiveness of this relationship are trust, the capacity to listen by both parties, and the friend's ability to offer feedback in a non-judgmental way.

Teachers make hundreds of decisions daily and often cannot extricate themselves

from the dynamics of their busy classrooms. Therefore, teachers need someone to serve as a critical friend. While school administrators and content supervisors might serve in this capacity, the hierarchical arrangement within schools would probably render this an unlikely possibility. For that kind of mentorship to be successful, unthreatening, and uncompetitive, a more egalitarian school culture needs to be cultivated.

Foundations faculty are in a strong position to serve as critical friends to teachers. As foundations specialists, they possess the knowledge of the social and political dynamics of schooling that is necessary for identifying classroom structures that remain largely hidden from busy teachers. Identification of these interaction structures is essential to the development of teacher awareness and the logical implications these practices have for children. Through a foundations approach, faculty might help teachers connect theory to practice and subsequently foster feelings of responsibility towards the ways they may be unintentionally reinforcing normative gender behaviors. This kind of relationship, however, takes time to nurture and necessitates more involvement in school settings on the part of foundations faculty. As a starting point, foundations faculty may achieve this goal by developing courses that involve a field component. The field component can be structured to hone requisite observation and analytic skills that pre-service teachers need to identify interaction structures; generate anecdotal evidence that can be used to bridge educational theory to actual classroom practice; and finally, foster relationships between foundations faculty and teachers.

Another compelling argument can be made for foundations faculty to serve as leaders in schools: the critical friend model used in education typically advocates for teachers to identify their own problems in their classroom. As this study illustrates, Laura and Peter's effectiveness as teachers could have been be enhanced through a critical examination of the dynamics in their classrooms but neither of them could identify the problem. Perhaps neither one of them had ever been asked to do this kind of work. Exacerbating the challenge of actually having the training to identify interaction structures is the present educational climate in which teachers work. Given the pressure that teachers face in the current high stakes climate, teachers may feel a real need to emphasize reflective work in the areas of curriculum and instruction and less so in the areas of socio-cultural dynamics. As a result teachers may be less committed to addressing problems and concerns that foundations educators identify.

Since many foundations educators are invested in the inequities embedded in the socio-cultural dynamics of classrooms and subsequently advocate for social change, then it behooves foundations educators to re-conceptualize what it means to do "foundations" work. The pressing challenge we face in teacher education is the effort to marginalize educational foundations in colleges and universities. Therefore, like our peers who focus primarily on curriculum and instruction (typically regarded as the nuts and bolts by teachers), foundations educators need to avail themselves of the daily realities of classroom teachers and foster the kind of critical friendships that support teachers' reflection on socio cultural dynamics. In order to make socio-cultural dynamics apparent to all constituencies, foundations

faculty must advocate for a foundations approach in programmatic design in teacher education. They must also participate in the practical applications of teacher education in methods and field based courses. As a result, the preparation and support of critically reflective teachers, who are skillful in examining the immediate and long term socio-cultural implications of the interaction structures embedded in their classrooms, will be enhanced

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